Commensality and Poisoning

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In all societies, sharing food is a way of establishing closeness, while, conversely, the refusal to share is one of the clearest marks of distance and enmity. These points have been repeatedly made by both anthropologists and psychologists (Miller, Fiske, and Rozin, 1998). Commensality, the action of eating together, is thus one of the most powerful operators of the social process.

The reason is that the sharing of food is, and is always seen to be, in some way or other, the sharing of that which will cause, or at least maintain, a common substance among those who commune together. I use the word commune here to evoke the Christian communion, the commemoration of the last supper, itself a transformation of the Jewish Passover feast (Feeley-Harnik, 1981). These are rituals that can be associated with that loose class of ceremonies that go under the label of "sacrifice," a most characteristic feature of which is the triumphal closing communal meal, usually of meat. This commensal aspect of sacrifice is an old theme in anthropology, first fully developed by the nineteenth century theologian Robertson-Smith, but which I, among others, have also recently discussed (Bloch, 1992a). However, the image of eating together as a form of communion is also found in much less complex and elevated practices such as the daily domestic meal of families across the globe, or, even and equally intriguingly if less openly, in the flirtatious practice of eating out of each other's plates, common in French restaurants and elsewhere.¹

If the theme of eating in common is universally an indication and a creator of bodily propinquity, this does not mean that we
should forget the great differences that exist between cultures. This kind of semi-universal phenomena (I use the contradiction in the terms advisedly) is an example of a familiar and awkward problem that continually has dogged the whole history of anthropology. First, we notice very obvious similarities across cultures that tempt us too quickly forward, towards grand generalizations that are then followed by the realization that there are differences, a setback that makes us retreat so completely that we seem to have nothing to say and that we deny the very reality that encouraged us in the first place. This is the difficulty of these loosely similar points of departure, of which the meanings evoked by commensality is typical and which probably will have, in the end, to be explained by theories other than the familiar comparative method of anthropology. Here, therefore, I limit myself to evoking one of the “almost recurrent” meanings of commensality by exploring briefly ethnographic examples, some of which I know from first hand and others for which I will rely on the literature. Only then will I venture a little further and begin to attempt to try to account for these incomplete regularities.

In considering any particular instance of the social significance of the sharing, or not, of food, anthropologists have usually paid particular attention to three factors. These are: 1) the symbolic significance of different foods; 2) the symbolic significance of different ways of preparing food; and 3) the relation of ideas concerning sharing substance through food and through procreation and sex. I shall take these three topics in turn before considering a particular example from Madagascar, where we shall see the three factors working together. Finally, this example will lead me to a consideration of some of the less attractive aspects of food sharing, for example, the disgust it may cause and even its association with antisocial behavior.

*The Differential Significance of Sharing Different Types of Food*

There are similarities attributed to the significance of sharing particular foods across cultures but the differences, nonetheless,
are wide. Thus, sharing wild honey in some African societies may be a powerful declaration of male solidarity, whereas it can be simply neutral, for example, in highland Philippines. However, it is the significance of sharing different foods within the same culture that has proved a particularly fruitful line of enquiry in anthropology. In particular, given the focus of this article, it is interesting to note how particular groups of people may view some foods as better social conductors than others: in France, for example, the eating of soup together implies a greater degree of togetherness than does eating popcorn. This example also shows that there is usually not a single scale of social conductivity in a single cultural context but several. The sharing of soup here is, to borrow from Durkheim, a sign of strong familial organic solidarity among people who are joined by their dissimilarity, whereas the sharing of popcorn is, to a certain extent, a sign of an egalitarian mechanical solidarity of a different sort. In this case, therefore, we find two co-occurring but different registers within which social conductivity is evaluated, whereas these evaluations are difficult to calibrate across registers.

The rankings and registers of social conductivity, just alluded to, often resemble each other across cultures, but these resemblances are, unfortunately, yet another case of the curse of the "semi-universality" mentioned above, which therefore tempts us to generalize further than caution would advise. In a general article such as this, however, I hope that such recklessness may be forgiven and viewed as, above all, a stimulus towards further research. So we may note in passing that in many, often quite unrelated, cultures the sharing of meat is a sign of a supreme closeness, though of a closeness that is usually understood as exceptional and which makes meat eating particularly suitable for feasts and celebrations. This may have something to do with the physiological kick that fat gives in diets where it is lacking; it may also be because animal flesh recalls the human flesh that it will contribute to create—a parallelism that further may evoke representations of an exchange of death for life. This particular symbolism is often explicitly alluded to in rituals of the sacrificial kind. In this type of ceremony we
often find a preference for the meat of large animals whose slaughter is spectacular. Conversely, the parallel between the two kinds of flesh also causes the near universal unease surrounding the slaughter of large animals in places where this has become a secular everyday occurrence (Vialles, 1994) or even where it is a rarer occasion (Hugh-Jones, 1996).

It would be wrong, however, to imagine that it is only meat that is considered as the supreme conductor of social identity. In a somewhat different way, this role is often given over to rice in Asian cultures. The link between the body of the consumers and this food is perhaps nowhere expressed better than among the Iban of Borneo, where each family used a genetically distinct strain of rice for food and for seed and normally avoided all others. In this way, the Iban could imagine their society in terms of a naturalized permanence where a particular genetic line of people was linked forever with a particular genetic line of grain. This has further implications. Thus the incorporation through marriage of a new spouse, an introduction of foreign genetic material that will strengthen the line, can also be represented and thought of in terms of food: The newcomer is brought in by means of his/her ritual ingestion of the rice of the family he or she is about to join (Freeman, 1958). The closeness of rice and humans can manifest itself in many other ways in south-east Asia. Thus, Trankell describes how, in Northern Thailand, the particularly lengthy process of preparing sticky rice, with its double cooking, is strongly valued, precisely because of its laboriousness and difficulty. The sequence of actions required is seen as that which animates, in all senses of the word, the very being of a united family (Trankell, 1995).

*The Processing of Food*

Levi-Strauss is one anthropologist who has stressed the differential social significance of different types of food preparation. He draws our attention to the different and contrasting evoca-
tions often attributed to boiled and roasted foods, as well as the stronger contrasts of cooked food with foods whose preparation requires some form of rotting, such as cheese, or foods eaten raw and unprepared (Levi-Strauss, 1968). Perhaps nothing illustrates better the different conductivity of these different modes of preparation than the case of traditional India. There high caste individuals would refuse boiled rice from a low caste person, but would accept fried rice because the heat of the process had, somehow, made the food a less potent and thus less dangerous communicator of ritual pollution. Much more complex distinctions are often made both in India and beyond. In much of south-east Asia, meals require boiled foods, and if this is present it implies a form of total social commitment that inevitably suggests kinship. On the other hand, what we can call snacks, not because they are not elaborate or plentiful but because they do not comprise boiled food, become suitable for the lesser social commitment of gatherings of non-kin such as, for example, the members of savings associations.

Food and Kinship

This last contrast, between the food of associations based merely on a practical purpose and the food of the family, brings me to the most thought provoking and perhaps the most complex aspect of the potential significance of commensality. Since the sharing of food expresses, and is also believed to cause, the bodily unification of the persons who eat together, it represents something similar to ideas about the unity between parents and children that is understood to result from the processes of procreation, or to the bodily unification that may be imagined to result from sexual intercourse. 2

The kinds of substantial unity evoked by food and kinship are, therefore, often in a dialectic relationship. Both are involved in the multistranded process of joining and rejoining that which was and would become separate.
In the case of kinship, in the common representations of human biology found in different cultures, the child is at first conceptualized as being one body with its mother, perhaps also with its father, but as gradually becoming with time more and more separated from its parents. This temporal separation also implies that siblings will grow apart as they become older. In a similar way, sexual partners that previously were separate bodies become united and may be believed to exchange something and therefore substantially unify, though this unification through sex is at the same time a further factor in the separation of those who were once united by birth and siblingship. This separation being the inevitable result of the incest taboo requires that sexual unification be with relative strangers. The flow of life implied by kinship and marriage is therefore perceived as a matter of bodies uniting and separating and uniting again.

Commensality evokes a similar dialectical process of temporal unification and diversification. Eating the same food unites the bodies that eat together and eating different foods distances them. This is particularly so when commensality involves eating "good conductor" foods, prepared by highly conductive techniques. As a result, families may be understood as being continually unified not only by biology but also by being commensal units. Thus, in a recent study, the French sociologist Anne Muxel shows that it is in terms of the recalling of shared meals that individuals' memory of their family is realized (Muxel, 1996). But then, as people grow older, if they are to participate in a wider social process, they will come to share the food of strangers; thus, as with sex, this exogamic commensality, because it joins bodies, will also relatively separate those who were previously united. As in the light of kinship, so in the light of food, life is understood as a continual process of bodily mergings and divisions.

A good example of this dual process is provided by Carsten in her discussion of Malay culture (Carsten, 1997). There the sharing of food is seen as establishing a bodily link almost as strong as the sharing of the substance that comes about in sexual union or the passing on of substance that occurs in child birth. Indeed, the
process of the maturation of the child in the womb is explicitly paralleled with the transformation of food from a foreign raw substance into something that will sustain and therefore continue the family through time. Thus, among Malays, being one family, one kinship group, one local group cannot be envisaged in terms that do not, in part, refer to the act of eating that which has been cooked on one hearth, whereas eating with strangers implies a separation of the original familial unity.

As a result, as in this case, the concepts of kinship and commensality act together and are often believed to imply one another. Breast feeding is often seen as the natural continuation of the linkage of the body of mother and child to the extent that, as in the Arab world, rules of incest often apply to people who, though unrelated by kinship, have been breast fed by the same woman.

In fact, in all cases, kinship created through birth is believed to be less negotiable and therefore less potentially innovative than the unification coming from food and sex. These are therefore often seen as tools in the hands of actors by which they can affect, change, or tune the unnegotiable aspect of parenthood and siblingship.

**A Malagasy Example**

The way these different factors come together can be illustrated by a single example. For this, I turn to my long-term fieldwork among a group of people in Madagascar, the Zafimaniry. These form a group who were traditionally slash and burn cultivators, growing maize, beans, etc, but who are now increasingly turning to irrigated rice because of deforestation. They number around 40,000 and live in the east coast forest of the great Island.

There is a lot to be said about their kinship system; but it can also be described, and this is what they do themselves, as though it was extraordinary simple. This is done in terms of a dominant image—of one well-maintained house inhabited by a single nuclear family. The family is thus visualized largely in terms of the
building and the location where the building is situated; it is thus a group gathered around the central post of the house, eating food cooked from the house's single hearth (Bloch, 1992b). The kinship terms used for address and description among these people are few and easily glossed into English as father, mother, child, older sibling, younger sibling.

It might at first be thought that these few terms would be insufficient to denote more remote relatives who do not live inside the one house. This is not so, because these terms can also be used for relatives that, in English, would be considered more remote: first cousins, for example, are referred to by the term for siblings, and this would in theory also be true for any cousin of one's own generation, however remote. The same is the case at the parental level, where any related adult of one's parent's generation is called by the terms used for one's own parents. Again, the same principle applies for the generation below. Part of the explanation for this apparently promiscuous extension of familial terms lies again in the fact that representations of kinship are dominated by the image of the single house with its elementary family. When the elementary terms are used to describe or address relatives who do not actually live in one house, these terms nonetheless evoke, through an implicit allusion, a single household: this is the house and the nuclear parental household of earlier generations, for example common grandparents, or, as the case requires, much more ancient ascendants and their houses, people who will most probably have disappeared long ago, although their houses may still be standing and be the object of an ancestral cult. This means that, in terms of a great grandparental household, second cousins can be seen as “co-children” of the adults of this evoked house, if, as is the case for the Zafimaniry, the term child can mean both children and their offspring. From the perspective of this evoked, but disappeared, nuclear family and their house, second cousins are siblings. As a result, since the population of the Zafimaniry is not large and the number of people interacting is limited, everybody can be, and should be, treated in this domestic idiom, because it is always possible to
evoke a house of which the people with whom one is interacting are “co-children” with oneself.

Of course, not everybody is thought of as equally close, and some people are clearly experienced as more remote, perhaps because of genealogical distance, perhaps because of geographical distance, or simply because one does not like them much. In such cases, although it would be offensive in the extreme not to refer to them as “brothers,” “sisters,” “mothers,” “fathers,” or “children” to their face, as soon as they have turned their back, people are quick to explain to strangers, who might really think that, for example, the visitor from a remote village one was just talking to was actually a full sister of one’s companion, that, really, this person was called sister only because the two share great great-grandparents, or whatever the case may be.4

By means of the device of the evocation of past houses and households, the dominant theme of Zafimaniry kinship is that it is simply a matter of elementary families living in one house. This image encompasses the central role given to commensality because one of the most important aspects of the prototypical house/family scene is a communal meal of food cooked on a single hearth by the “mother.” In this evocation, this commensal meal entails kinship and shared bodily substance; in such a situation whether it is commensality that creates kinship or kinship that creates commensality is a question totally obscured by this holistic representation. However, this evidence, as we shall see, hides the same ambiguities that lie behind the apparently simple system suggested by the kinship terms.5

This is because, in exactly the same way as remote kin (and that includes all Zafimaniry) are treated terminologically as though they were part of one’s own elementary family by evoking a household scene in a house that has probably disappeared long ago, so too, in terms of food, these “relatives” must be treated as though they, truly belonged to the house they are, in fact, probably merely visiting. This means that any stranger to the domestic unit will always be invited to come and partake of meals with phrases such as “come and eat, my child” or “my mother,” “my father,”
"my older sibling," "my younger sibling," and, under normal circumstances, it is impossible to refuse such an invitation. Hence, the circle of commensals is also stereotypically anchored in the image of the elementary family, but in fact it is always potentially expandable to everybody and anybody with whom one comes into contact. This potential is commonly realized as, without warning, the commensal family circle is expanded to include people of different degrees of closeness who are treated, outwardly at least, as "one of the family."

The same logic operates on a grand scale in feasts. These bring together large groups of people who, it is presumed and always emphatically stated, are the children of one household or other, which existed in the past, but which unfortunately has become divided by the passage of generations and the intrusion of marriage links. In the feast, however, these children are gathered together, eating together: they are one once again. Such a statement of oneness is, however, at one level, also well understood as a denial of the reality of life outside the festive context, because everybody knows that when those present go home, they will then belong to different, perhaps competing, households. The context of the feast thus brings back the contradiction that is highlighted when those who, at one moment, call a person a true sibling and afterward say she is no such thing. However, to see in all this simply a mere polite white lie would be too simple, as it would be to ignore the full meaning of commensality.

This is because we must not forget that eating together is not a mere reflection of common substance, it is also a mechanism that creates it. As noted above, normally the consubstantiation that comes from kinship and commensality are so tightly bound that they cannot be thought of separately; but when they become separated we can see that they operate differently and even that a dialectic exists between them.

Before exploring this, however, it is necessary to understand the significance of the food itself for the Zafimaniry. The basic meal, which for them carries all the symbolic weight of communion, consists of a combination of a staple, usually dried maize
and a few beans, and a tiny relish that can be almost any type of vegetable, fish, or more occasionally meat. Nothing is comparable with this type meal in terms of significance. Apart from the foods that are included in such a meal, there are, however, also foods and combinations of food that are less meaningful. The foods that are accorded least social import are wild food such as shrimps, small fish, or fruit and berries. I am tempted to say that these have, according to Zafimaniry views, no true nutritive value in that they do not strengthen and build the body, and therefore are not taken seriously. Their lack of significance, however, also indicates that they have no social value in that they do not bind people. The nutritive and social aspects are thus truly inseparable. Roasted foods, whether they be corn cobs or bits of meat, are also not the foods of communion, though they often are seen as a kind of promise of the communion of boiled food. Thus at the beginning of feasts, when a large animal has been killed, people eat with great excitement bits of roast liver on skewers, in anticipation for the meal whose preparation through boiling will take a much longer time. Finally, eating boiled food without relish, or relish without boiled food, taken in however great quantities, does not bring the familial unity which alone truly nourishes.

Then, even more than the standard meal, there are some foods that are seen as super-conductors of social consubstantiality, what we can call “rhetorical conductors.” These are honey and rum. Both, although single uncooked substances, are in some way a super and complete meal that can be prepared quickly. These foods, however, somehow also suggest less familial and intimate acts of communion. The two are not identical. Honey is something one shares with a respected superior and therefore, although it diminishes distance, it, does not, like the family meal, remove hierarchy. Rum, on the other hand, diminishes both distance and hierarchy. In the case of honey and rum, commensality does not just abolish distance between those gathered together, but also between the living and the ancestors who are invited to partake in the food and be there again. After all, it is their house that is being reactivated.
This discussion of the different “conducting” potential of foods shows that they are active factors in creating closeness or, to be more accurate, in recreating closeness, because they bring back people who have been divided by time. Thus, for the Zafimaniry, the dialectic flow of life is created by a balance between actions that join and rejoin (which include, birth, sex and commensality) and time that gradually separates.

But the joining or rejoining through sex and food are also problematic. Sex, in the Zafimaniry idiom of dominant endogamy, can be understood as bringing those who were once united together again; but it is also well known that, under this vague evocation of regrouping, it can dangerously bring into the domestic unit total strangers who secretly reject its isolationist tendency or who, for a variety of reasons, want to keep their distance. The same is true of food.

For example, the unity of the living and the dead that is brought about in feasts (Astuti, 1994) is not only pious, and even jolly, it also has its horrifying aspect. For the Zafimaniry, the dead, as bodies, are terrifying and polluting and, although in feasts they do not return as corpses but in more mysterious ways, something of the horror of the dead still hangs about them. Secondly, although the ancestors care for their descendants, they do it in such a stern way that one does not really want them around too much. This is because their main way of ensuring proper behavior from their descendants is by sending disease. As a result, the contact and consubstantiality brought about by the feast is both an occasion of joy at being reunited with the dead, and a very uncomfortable affair.

The other source of discomfort in commensality is the fear of poisoning. The Zafimaniry are as obsessed by the theme of poisoning as they are by the theme of domestic oneness. In reality, for them, the two are different sides of the same coin. Whenever one goes away to a foreign village, it is advisable to take a magical antidote to poisoning. The same is true whenever one goes to a feast. The reason is that when one goes to see more distant relatives one will be drawn into that act of substantial domestic uni-
Commensality abolishes the separation brought about by time, but this separation also has a positive side, for the individual at least. It is the source of independence from one’s parents and one’s siblings. It has been brought about by marriage that has given you the individual ability to reproduce. It has given you the opportunity to distance yourself from those with whom you may be in competition. Commensality, therefore, threatens independence and throws you into far too great intimacy with those with whom you may be in conflict. The whole ambiguity of making one those who are in fact separate becomes dangerous. Perhaps, as in the case of a distant relative invited as a “child” to a foreign house, the person invited and the host were once “one house;” but that time is long ago, and many divisions have occurred since then, other ties incompatible with the original household have been created. As a result, there is always the fear that the closeness that is being created by the direct bodily communication that certain foods establish will simply become a means of getting at you. This is what is expressed by the fear of poisoning. And, as might be expected, the better a food is as a conductor that creates bodily closeness, the better it is as a medium of poison.

The fear of poisoning is always present when strangers are treated as close kin, and it is particularly present at feast when large groups of people suddenly become “one house” eating from one hearth. Attending feasts is, therefore, particularly dangerous and so, as noted above, all Zafimaniry take protective medicines against poisoning whenever they attend one. The same danger exists with visiting.

This means that every invitation given and accepted is not only an act of solidarity; it is also always a test. Will you dare to eat with me and become one? This unspoken question lies, I would argue, behind all acts of commensality among the Zafimaniry. It is the negative consequence of the meaning given to the positive act of inclusion into a single house and nuclear family that every invitation to share food implies.
Commensality is thus revealed as a social operator of much greater complexity than it appeared at first. It is not merely a binder of the social system, as kinship created by birth is thought to be; it becomes the means by which the domestic house unit can be adventurously expanded by means of an idiom that seems most unadventurous. And the adventures it allows, like all adventures, are both the means by which one's life can be expanded and are dangerous.

**Commensality as a Test**

I have used this Zafimaniry example to demonstrate how, even when we are dealing with people very different from contemporary Euro-Americans, very familiar themes reappear. I have used it also to show the negative side of commensality in a particularly explicit case. But I am inevitably drawn to asking the question whether the element of dare and testing that exists in Zafimaniry commensality may not also be seen much nearer home, and indeed may be shown to be an essential and inevitable aspect of commensality.

After all, the flirting couple in the French restaurant I alluded to above, may not just want to become closer, they may well be challenging and testing each other, to find out how far the other is willing to engage in greater intimacies. They may be using the easily innovative consubstantiality suggested by commensality to establish, re-establish, or modify much less labile commitments. And as they use this supremely creative tool, which disguises its adventurousness behind a show of reassuring homeliness, they are inevitably running the risks of social innovation. This is a generalization that I believe is worth testing further.

There is also another, even more general, way of considering this same issue. Paul Rozin in this volume points out how it is of the nature of an omnivorous species such as ours to be continually testing out new foods and, in the process, overcoming disgust or other off-putting superficialities. Such testing is clearly of
value, as it permits the exploitation of a wide range of sources of nutrition, but it is also full of obvious dangers, not least the risk of poisoning. In a social species such as Homo sapiens, this testing takes on a social form because it involves not only individual experience, but also accepting the authority of those whom one can trust about the edibility of certain foods. This means that commensality with them is a form of guarantee of non-poisoning.

However, a successful social career cannot be just a matter of keeping close to those whom one has known from birth; it must also be a reasonably adventurous one, involving the formation of bonds beyond one's immediate family. These new bonds, in order to have some sort of moral guarantee, are likely to have to use the very representations of the more familiar ties that they transcend. In other words, if these new bonds are to have some of the emotional power of the close relationships, the forming of these bonds will involve taking the risk of projecting familial behaviors on to relative strangers. One of these behaviors is commensality, where the risks involved in eating are normally neutralized by eating with those one knows well. If one has to, or wants to, eat with distant others, however, it is normal that the fear of poisoning should increase, and, as a result, the willingness to overcome that fear becomes a proof of a commitment that is continually being bargained about in the process of establishing moral social links. This seems to be the case in the Zafimaniry example and in the other cases alluded to in this article. Thus, very basic aspects of the human condition would account for the cultural recurrences that this paper illustrates.

Here, however, we must sound the usual note of caution that the discovery of semi-universals always require, and that was discussed above. The cultural forms and meanings of commensality are varied and therefore no universal human predisposition can fully or directly account for them. At the same time, it would be ridiculous to close our eyes to such strong regularities. Perhaps the kind of model suggested by Dan Sperber (1996) is the most appropriate here, whereby we explain the regularities we have found in terms of the fact that certain representations are merely
particularly catching. This would be because they match general human predispositions, without these predispositions being the source of the representations themselves. This source having to be found, in part, in the different histories of the different groups concerned, hence the differences. All this is therefore speculation, but speculation that, I believe, could be a fruitful source of further questions and research.

Notes

1There is a common French saying implying that if you drink from someone else’s glass you will know their thoughts.

2Miller et al. 1988 show systematically that the points discussed in this article apply to the United States.

3I am only concerned here with terms of address.

4For the purpose of this paper, I am ignoring affinity as it would take too much space. However, it should be included in this discussion and would fit in well. Thus, this idiom of kinship, which wants to see all relations in terms of elementary families, hides yet another fact of which the Zafimaniry are only too aware. This is that the continuity of the family, or, to put it in their terms, the survival of the house of a couple through its children, grand children, great grand children and so on..., is only possible through the taking in of strangers, as wives of the men, and through separation as the daughters leave to become other men’s wives. On a daily basis, however, this is papered over by the parent-child idiom and so a man will call his daughter-in-law or son-in-law “daughter” and “son” respectively, and this will apply equally to these in-laws’ siblings and so on for all their families.

5This excludes the descendants of slaves, but this fact is often glossed over.

6This theme needs much more expansion than is possible here.

7This is especially true of siblings.

8The best conductor of closeness is, therefore, rum. The exception is honey, which creates closeness but neutralizes poison. The reason has probably something to do with the fact that honey implies hierarchy whereas rum implies equality.
References


